



Peter Gold, shown here with saz, also plays bouzoukee and guitar.



Laszlo Kubinyi, who studied music in the Middle East, plays the dumbeg.

By BILL GUTHRIE

Fingers drum excitedly on your chair arm as the oud simply, rhythmically states its theme. A feeling of exhilaration creeps downward through your body as you hear the guitar, the saz, the dumbeg join in with melody superimposed upon exotic rhythm, improvisation following improvisation. The feeling comes out the soles of your shoes as your feet begin to bounce.

There is no quiet, contemplative enjoyment of the music of the oud, the saz and the dumbeg. Music of the Middle East is music of motion and dance. Music of "The Halvah-Jees" is an elevated, professional, yet genuine interpreta-

tion of Middle East music, whether the folk rhythms and melodies be Armenian, Turkish, Greek, Israeli, North African or Arab.

"The Halvah-Jees" (the Candy Makers) are a Middle East music and belly dance group which tours the east and west coasts performing in night clubs, college concerts, music festivals, conventions, etc.

Recently they played, and were a big hit, playing the 200-year-old songs of the Middle East, at the annual Culinary Union Ball.

Originator of the "The Halvah-Jees" is John Chookasian, 30, who plays the oud and the C and G clarinet. He is a graduate of New York University with a B.A. and M.A. in music.

Chookasian, drawing from his Armenian background, early became interested in the music of his fathers, the music of the Middle East. Today he feels strongly motivated to present that music with its strange (to western ears) tones and rhythms for America to gain knowledge of a distant culture.

The music is played in Byzantine modes which date back to 206 B.C. These modes contain 1/16, 1/8, 1/4, 1/2 and whole tones within its structure.

All rhythms of western music is used, plus many odd rhythms, such as 3/8, 5/4, 7/8, 9/8, 9/4, 10/8 11/8 11/4, 12/8 and 14/8. Many syncopations are used within these rhythms.

The music starts with an opening statement, called a taxim. This is followed by melody, then improvisation with each musician deviating from the melody and projecting his artistry within the mode of the song. Finally, the musicians move back to the melody.

Some of the instruments are as unusual as the melodies and rhythms.

The oud, which carries much of the melody, is a fretless lute of the near east. It has 11 strings, 10 double strings tuned in unison and one drone or bass string. Historically, the oud is played with the feather of a Middle East eagle. Since those feathers are difficult to come by, Chookasian uses a plastic pick.

The kanun is a lap harp with 72 strings. It is tuned so each three consecutive strings is in unison. Often the kanun is played with whale bones fixed by rings to the first finger of each hand.

Popularized by the movie "Zorba the Greek," the bouzoukee, or saz, is a near

Middle



Zeki Aafarian, Turkish born, plays the ancient kanun and sings.



Princess Nyeela is one in Turkey.



Paul Kimatian plays dumbeg, tambourine and zils, all important because some Mideast music is constructed around the percussion instruments.



Chick Ganimian plays the oud, a fretless stringed instrument much like a lute.

East Music



dancers with "The Halvah-Jees." She was born

east banjo. It has four double strings tuned in unison.

The rebab is a near east violin of varying sizes.

Woodwinds used by "The Halvah-Jees" include the C and G clarinets and various near and mideast wooden flutes.

Percussion instruments include the dumbeg, near east hand drum with calf, fish or goat skin stretched across a turnable head. The drum has an hour glass shape.

Both the tambourine and zils (finger cymbals) are used for rhythm.

"The Halvah-Jees" also come up with a sound unique to the Middle East by occasionally adding a sitar (India) for melody.

However, Chookasian insists on remaining faithful to the ancient melodies, rhythms and sounds of Middle East music.

The bulk of the 10 musicians who make up "The Halvah-Jees" are of Middle East descent, although Michael Apollon and Davis McGuffin are of Western descent.

Other members of the group are Chick Ganimian, Zeki Aafarian, Peter Gold, Antoine Hage, Sarkis Kerokunian, Laszlo Kubinyi and Paul Kimatian.

Aafarian, Hage, Kerokunian and Kubinyi all studied music in the Middle East and contribute greatly to the authenticity of the sound of "The Halvah-Jees."

A major part of a performance by "The Halvah-Jees" is the belly dancing of Keri Noven or Princess Nyeela. Miss Noven, a veteran Las Vegas dancer, is from Tucson, Arizona. Princess Nyeela was born in Istanbul.

Chookasian said Americans really misunderstand belly dancing, which he says developed in Egypt as a religious rite during the reign of the Pharaohs.

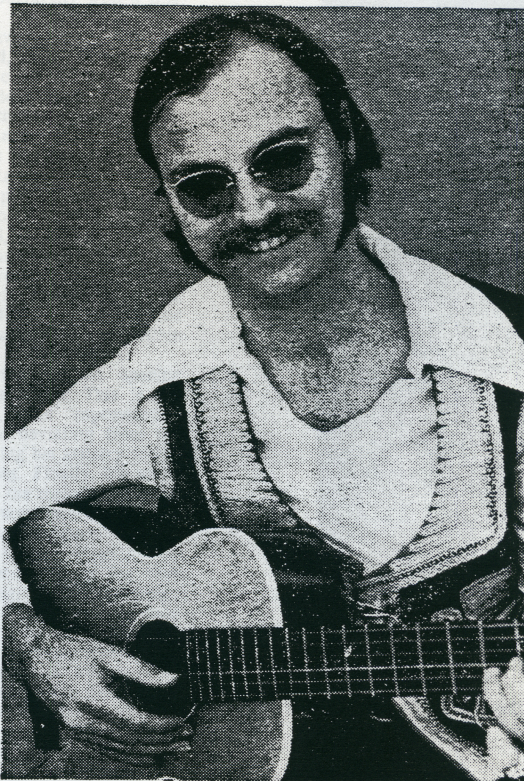
"This art form has endured throughout the centuries because it is symbolic of an entire culture," said Chookasian. "Each dancer must learn the traditional framework of the dance, which takes many years of hard study. Every movement of the body tells an ancient, mystical story of the Middle East."

Rev. Father Steve Prodromides, pastor of St. John's Eastern Orthodox Church, reiterates Chookasian's remarks about the belly dancer, but admits it is difficult for westerners to understand the significance of the dance without knowing the culture.

"The Halvah-Jees" are in demand on the college circuit, both as performers and lecturers on Middle East music. They also stay busy playing night clubs, conventions, or even church socials.

Chookasian says his main aspiration is to tour for the U.S. State Department as ambassadors of good-will, and to be invited by the Russian government to perform in Soviet Armenia.

A performance of Chookasian's "Halvah-Jees," whether it be in a college auditorium, a smoke-ringed night club or a church social, is emotionally stirring as well as educational and culturally significant.



Davis McGuffin provides bass and rhythm backup guitar and sometimes leads with the sitar.